

How We Sank into Vietnam

Joseph Buttinger

One of the most puzzling questions future historians will have to deal with is why the United States ever got involved in the contemporary struggle for Indochina that has been going on since 1945. Did the considerations that determined the course of American foreign policy after World War II make this involvement inevitable or could it have been avoided in spite of the tensions that arose after 1945 between the West and the so-called Communist bloc? On this point, opinions will probably always remain divided, but those who believe that no other course could have been chosen without damage to the West or the United States would do well to consider the following:

(1) no Indochina war would have taken place if France had not insisted on reestablishing its control over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after these countries had gained independence following the Japanese surrender in 1945;

(2) it is questionable that the United States would ever have reached the point of even considering intervention in Vietnamese affairs if it had refused from the beginning to support the reestablishment of French rule in Indochina.

It is indeed one of the important conclusions of the Pentagon Papers "that the Truman Administration's decision to give military aid to France in her colonial war against the Communist-led Vietminh 'directly involved' the United States in Vietnam and 'set' the course of American policy."¹

Yet this decision was made only in 1950, after the victory of Communism in China and the recognition of Ho Chi Minh's regime by the Soviet Union and Communist China. It would never have come about had it not been preceded by the decision made by the victorious Allies at the Potsdam Conference of July 17 to August 2, 1945, which gave the French not only a free hand but also Allied support for the reconquest of Indochina. This Potsdam decision, supported only by the British under both Churchill and Attlee, might not have been taken if President

Roosevelt had still been alive. It was opposed by Nationalist China under Chiang Kai-shek and certainly not favored by Stalin. Vigorous American opposition to it would probably have led to the acceptance of Roosevelt's concept of a United Nations Trusteeship for French Indochina as a first step toward full independence.

Surprisingly on this crucial point the conclusion of the Pentagon Papers is that Roosevelt "never made up his mind whether to support the French desire to reclaim their Indochinese colonies from the Japanese at the end of the war."² In view of the forceful statements Roosevelt made against the return of the French to Indochina to his Secretary of State Cordell Hull and to his son Elliot, as reported in their memoirs,³ this conclusion must be regarded as erroneous.

There has been much speculation about the question whether American massive military intervention in Vietnam might not have been avoided if President Kennedy had been alive. It is unlikely that this question will ever be answered with any degree of certainty. But it is probable that Vietnam after 1945 would have experienced a period of peaceful evolution toward independence, under a regime not unlike that of Tito's Yugoslavia, if Roosevelt had lived and succeeded in imposing his anticolonial solution for Indochina. Nor is it far-fetched to assume that Roosevelt would not have disregarded the appeals of Ho Chi Minh, in at least eight letters to Washington in 1945-46 for United States and United Nations intervention against French colonialism.⁴ "There is no record . . . that any of these appeals were answered."⁵ Not until publication of the Pentagon Papers did the American public hear of the existence of these letters.

Yet the Truman administration's policy toward Vietnam remained ambivalent for at least the first three years of the Indochina war. On the one hand, the U.S. "fully recognized France's sovereign position," as Secretary of State George Marshall said in a still secret State Department cablegram sent to the U.S. Embassy in Paris; on the other hand,